

SERMON for the 3RD SUNDAY after the EPIHANY

1st Presbyterian Church, Bemidji 2011

Matthew 4:12-24

ON LEAVING HOME

The gospel lesson this morning triggered a memory and just a little twinge of guilt. It was in the final year of the Second World War. I was 17 and in my last year of high school. With my father's signed consent because I was still a minor child, I joined the Navy; and before the end of the school year, I was called to active duty.

A benevolent school

system allowed me to graduate *in absentia*, and my mother received my diploma along with several other service mothers at the graduation ceremony. I remember the day I left home on the bus for the induction center.

We lived on a farm, a small farm. It was early spring and, we were about to start the work of plowing and harrowing and otherwise getting ready to plant the corn and soy beans. I shared the work as every farm boy did, after school and on the week-ends, and even in the early morning before school, when the work was urgent. The day I left, my mother and father drove me to town and saw me off to the induction center. I don't think I looked back, so excited I was about the adventure ahead.

It was only years later, after my parents were both gone, that I was suddenly struck by the question about how they must have felt, watching their son go off to an entirely different kind of life and never looking back; and my father left with all that work and no helper.

Think, now, about Zebedee, and put yourself in his place, sitting with his sons at the edge of the sea, mending their fishing nets, getting ready for another round of routine work. Down the beach comes this energetic young prophet. There would have been a greeting, a bit of conversation, and the two sons leave the boat the nets, the fish and the father, and set off to a new and risky life, not looking back. A lot of us can identify with that as we have watched our own sons and daughters launch out on lives that they, not we, have chosen, lives to which they have been called, or enterprises that in some mysterious way have called them. Just like us, in our day and time.

What must Zebedee have been thinking, wondering, feeling, questioning. There must have been worry about the loss of his helpers and the companionship of fathers and sons as they worked together. Or did he, in his own way understand

that the call that had so powerfully drawn his sons to that vital young prophet was in his way his own call? Did he recognize, realize, understand and believe in his own heart, that this man, Jesus, was from God? And that somehow the call that had drawn away his sons was, in a sense, his call as well – that his sacrifice, too, was a kind of following? Discipleship comes in many shapes and sizes.

Jesus called people to be his learners and followers. He didn't need to certify his own calling, as the prophet had or as Paul would do later. In the gospel it is entirely clear that, even without the evidence of his resurrection, his vibrant human personhood was everything necessary to draw men and women to himself, and everything necessary to demonstrate that he had come from God.

From Jesus to Andrew, to Peter, to us, to the world: the over-arching pattern persists. One way or another we are called. We are God's chosen people, and we are chosen whether we like it or not. It seems dangerous to think of being a chosen people, and we have to wrestle with that. If we are chosen, does it mean that others are not?

I once received a courtesy copy of a journal from Yeshiva University in New York, a very respectable Jewish institution. I don't know why they sent it to me, but I glanced through it and came across an article that grabbed my attention. A woman rabbi wrote about a university class she was teaching. She was outlining the standard story of the exodus from Egypt and telling how God had chosen their people and had given the Land of Canaan to the tribes of Israel. This thoughtful teacher was blind-sided by a question from one of her students who asked, "Didn't God also care for the Canaanites?"

That innocent question prompted the rabbi, as it prompts me, continually, to ask just exactly what does being a chosen person or a chosen people imply.

There is a temptation to think that being chosen is a sign of some spiritual distinction or superiority. It is God who chooses, and that choice, of a people or a person to do his work, obeys a different kind of logic from what we have learned to call "common sense." As I wrestle with the question, I come away with the sense that God's chosen people are remarkably diverse and contradictory, and that the image of the church that would emerge from Jesus' vision is like that. Its people have failures of courage and weaknesses of character. They also have remarkable and often unrecognized spiritual strength. They are obligated to love

and serve the Lord, as we acknowledge with thanks at the end of our worship. They are obligated to serve the common good with justice and mercy, humility and peace. They are charged to treat each other with the love that Christ has shown to them. They can also be selfish and insensitive and vain. In short, the chosen people are human.

The magnificent mystery is that it is just such as these, just such as you and me, that God calls and commissions to draw the world to him, chosen as much for their weakness as for their strength, as much for their vulnerability as for their courage. Ultimately, all of us, have nothing to fall back on but our faith and our vision of worthwhile-ness in life. It would be a mistake, however, to think that being chosen is an easy thing. For Moses and the prophets it was anything but easy. For Jesus it led to the cross. Likewise for ourselves it involves responsibility. It involves work and sacrifice and no small measure of anxiety over hard choices.

To commit ourselves and our undertakings to Christ and to the kingdom he proclaimed is the biggest adventure in the world. When with a certain daring we set out into the dark unknown, we discover that it is not dark at all, but radiant with abundant life, and liberty, and peace.

This is our God, our faith, our church. We did not choose it, even if we think we did. In some mysterious way, it chose us. In the long run it is whatever is at work in us -- call it, maybe, the Holy Spirit; that wants us to look beyond the increasingly indifferent and tawdry culture that tries to draw us to its own level, and to recognize what is true and good and beautiful and holy wherever we see it; and in that vision to proclaim it as the kingdom of God.